

## **With You, I Can Breathe Again** by **MidnightEverlark**

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**Summary:** When El steps through the door of the Byer's house, it's like a freight train has been lifted from Mike's chest. And El - El feels like she came home. It's been a long and trying eleven months, and with the wait finally over, Mike and Eleven pick up where they left off. Alternating POVs from the moment Mike and Eleven reunite onward. Little bits of angst and grit but mostly happy.

## **With You, I Can Breathe Again**

**Mike**

Mike is ready.

The screech and gurgle of the creatures draws nearer. Things from the Upside Down always seem to emit noises that cut right through brick and mortar, as if their cries don't interact with the physical world the way that regular sound does. It makes them hard to track. Hard to tell if they're around a corner or right behind you. Mike shifts his grip on the candlestick he snatched off of a table. It was the first thing he could get his hands on.

The noises have changed. There's yelping, and chuffing, and the rustle and rattle of movement through the bushes.

He has a vague thought that maybe if they get him, they'll drag him back to the Upside Down, and he can look for her. It's a stupid thought, and he knows it; the demodogs have displayed far more interest in killing than capturing. And there are at least a dozen outside the house. Six-inch claws and rows upon rows of teeth and coiled, compact muscle against two guns, a nail bat, a slingshot and a candlestick. The probability of victory is low.

Mike is ready.

The window bursts into a spray of glass and a dark shape slams into the opposite wall. The group yells and stumbles back as one but - it's limp. The demodog lies immobile in the corner, body slick with slime and the petals of its face spread out over one of Will's drawings.

"Holy shit," is Dustin's comment, and Max says, "Is it dead?"

Chief Hopper slinks forward. Extends a foot. And Mike is sure the thing will snap back to life and take his leg off, but there's only a faint squelch as he nudges at it.

A creak from the porch shoves Mike's heart right back up his throat. It's the familiar low creak of old wood taking weight. There's

something outside the door. His fingers have gone numb on the candlestick, and so has the rest of him. He knows he failed. He failed his best friend, he failed the party, he failed *her*. He broke his promises.

The bolt *clacks* in the door. The chain slides, then drops, and weapons rise into ready positions. And Mike takes a half-step forward. Staring.

A click, a creak, and cold air streams into the living room. And around Hopper's shoulder, Mike watches a small figure step through the doorway.

Déjà vu. All the times he thought he saw her. All the times the radio static tricked him into hearing her voice. All the times something fell on its own and he jumped up in case it was her. And he thought he had stopped hoping, he thought he had managed to silence the voice inside him that said, *maybe, maybe*, but that tenuous control leaves him in a split second. Because maybe - it might be - it *could be* -

El.

The room turns fuzzy - or maybe just unimportant - and Mike drifts forward in a haze, past Hopper, past the candlestick that somehow ended up on the floor. Moving is difficult, like running in a dream, but that doesn't matter. Her head tilts up, out of the glare she takes on when using her powers, and a smudge of blood glistens just above her lip. She's looking back at him. And all at once he knows this isn't a trick of the light. He *knows*. It's her.

The first thing he can process is an enormous sensation of release. A freight train lifted from his ribs. Like suddenly he can take a full, deep breath, and for eleven months he hadn't realized how hard it was to breathe. Like taking off a pair of sunglasses and realizing just how dark everything was before. Like something has been *wrong*, has been *off* for a year, like he's been in a dream or underwater - like his ears have been plugged and he only realized it once they popped.

And then everything turns on its head and it's easy to move now, so easy it startles him, as if he's in low-gravity, and he's in front of her.

"Eleven?"

And she answers - she *answers* - "Mike."

The half-whisper hasn't yet left her lips before his arms reach out and he's pulling her to him, crushing her against him so hard it must hurt, but her grip on his shoulders is just as tight. There's the smell of hairspray and a gasp and the feel of wind-chilled leather under his hands, and his heart kicks at his ribs like it's trying to break through to the person on the other side. Shallow breaths heave up his throat as she presses her chin into his shoulder, and he can't tell if he's laughing or about to cry, but it doesn't much matter either way. The warmth and solidness of her small frame - the crushing grip of her arms around him - are the best thing he's felt in a long, long time. The haze is gone. Everything has become abruptly sharp and clear and immediate, and as El gives one small sob, Mike beams into her hair.

Hair.

He leans back for a better look, but instead says the thing he's been aching to tell her for weeks and months. "I never gave up on you." He can't stop smiling, and it seems like she can't either. "I called you every night. Every night for -"

"Three hundred and fifty three days," she finishes with a bob of her head. The shape of her smile, the glint of blood just under her nose, her dark eyes, everything is so familiar. "I heard."

Something in Mike's gut seems to execute a complicated evasive maneuver. He feels the smile fade from his face, and her intense gaze meets his without flinching. "Why didn't you tell me you were there? That you were okay?"

"Because I wouldn't let her," Hopper says, and Mike spins, startled at the interruption. And then the words register.

El

Eleven is ready.

She follows the wailing of the monsters all the way up the long driveway. The sun set long ago, when she was just arriving in town,

eyes tired and limbs stiff from her long journey. It's cold now. But she's braved much colder weather than this, and with less suitable clothes, and she barely shivers when the wind kicks up. The shrieking of the monsters though... that sends her skin crawling. She shrugs, adjusting the black jacket Kali gave her and pushing the bracelets up her arms to allow her hands freedom of movement.

*I can save them*, she tells herself. It's been her mantra since she ran from Kali and the others. *I can save them*.

She hadn't known what the danger was when she saw Mike in the Void, struggling against invisible assailants, screaming into the blackness. She knows now. As soon as she stepped into Hawkins, she knew.

El is ready. To fight. And to win.

Papa used to say that the best thing you could be was *useful*. To finish the task, to pass the test, to contribute to the Project. To complete your mission. El breathes in the smell of rich autumn air, cold asphalt, and rot. The Upside Down has been breathing putrid air into Hawkins, and the stink grows stronger as she comes to the end of the driveway. Adolescent demogorgons slink around Joyce Byer's house on all fours, too young to balance on two legs, keening and cackling to each other. They haven't noticed her yet.

She will complete her mission. Mike's mission. She will warn them.

Her left hand lifts.

It doesn't take long.

She accidentally blasts the last one through the front window, evoking a smattering of screams and yells from within. It sounds like a bunch of people inside, and suddenly she's afraid that Mike won't be one of them. She came all this way - waited so long - and what if he's not there? What if they tell her he's missing, or trapped, or -

No. He's alive. She saw him.

There are no more voices beyond the door, and the monsters are dead and silent on the lawn. El can hear her own heartbeat and

breathing, feel her pulse in her fingertips. She moves up the porch steps like a marionette and reaches out with her mind, feeling for the lock and twisting it. Then the handle turns and she takes one more breath before she steps forward, ready for whatever threats she has to face on the other side.

Jim Hopper stands at the forefront of the crowd, and he lowers his gun when he sees her. She worries, for the first time, about her appearance, about the questions he might ask, what he might think. But that only lasts for a moment, because then Mike steps around the others.

The deep *thrum* of power fades from the base of her skull, and El lets it trickle away into nothing. She doesn't know if she'd be able to hold onto it if she had to. Not now. Her focus is entirely elsewhere.

He's taller now. His hair is a tad longer and his cheeks aren't as round, his face a shade longer and more angled. But the crooked, close-lipped smile that comes onto his face is entirely Mike. Everything comes back in a rush. The rain, the blanket fort in the basement, the shared smiles, the bike rides, the laughter, the pink dress, the kiss, the goodbye. The first person that treated her like another person. Not an experiment or a thing or a wounded animal or a freak, but a person. A friend.

Fleetingly, El thinks that she should be checking for more monsters. But right now she doesn't feel like the same girl that crushed a demogorgon's skull just sixty seconds ago. She's not tough, she's not ready to fight, she's not powerful or weighed down with a mission. She's just a young girl coming home, tired and soft and happy - so happy. She sees him. And he sees her - *he* sees *her*, for the first time in a year, and she wants to scream and laugh and jump and press her lips against his like he did in the cafeteria, before the goodbye. But her legs have turned to bundles of spaghetti noodles and when she opens her mouth it's a breathy question that comes out: "Mike?"

He squeezes all the air out of her lungs when he hugs her, and she has to gasp to get it back, but she doesn't care one bit. She just tucks her chin against his neck and holds on. His shoulders shake under her arms. She feels a year younger. A mix of dried sweat and hospital antiseptic and dust and the sharp autumn evening linger in his

hoodie, and she buries her nose in it. It wouldn't be a particularly pleasant smell in any other situation, but there are no scents in the void. Only muted echoes, and projections of reality that dissolve into dust when touched. The smell is confirmation that Mike is *real*, that he's *here*, he's not going to melt away into nothingness and leave her alone in the cold, empty Void like every other time.

The smell, and the warmth. Nothing is warm in the Void.

Mike is warm.